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ABSTRACT

Even though television scholar Herbert Zettl singlehandedly created the term "television aesthetics" by proclaiming that TV is an art, television studies are still excluded from the respectable divisions and disciplines of knowledge. Television is considered the epitome of mass culture/kitsch, and the very idea of a TV "masterpiece," for example, is improbable. "Television theory" would be a preferable label for a field of study that has been developing in isolated strands since the 1930s, and which can be divided into roughly four stages: (1) through the early 1950s--the main theoretical question was whether TV is itself an art or merely a "transmission device" for the other arts; (2) early 1950s to early 1960s--the Golden Age of TV proved that its dramatic form can be artistically powerful; (3) early 1960s to early 1970s--TV penetration into American homes reached 99% by the 1970s; and (4) early 1970s to the present--video art and low-cost technology proliferated. Marshall McLuhan noted that most thinking about a new medium is done in terms of old media. As television theory develops, new concepts of what TV is, how it got to be that way, why it remains that way, and how and why to change it, will be formulated. (Footnotes, a very extensive chronological bibliography of works related to television theory, and a comprehensive list of production books and dissertations are appended.) (NKA)

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Historical Development of Television Aesthetics/Television Theory

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Historical Development of

Television Aesthetics/Television Theory

"If we were to collect all the studies and articles printed on the various effects of television, on television as a social institution or even cultural phenomenon, we would probably have to hire a big truck to haul it all away. And yet, the writings that are specifically concerned with television aesthetics would probably fit quite comfortably into a normal-sized briefcase."[1]

Strictly speaking, Herbert Zettl is correct in his statement quoted above. Nonetheless, his argument is somewhat misleading. As the bibliography at the end of this essay indicates, a collection of the works relevant to television aesthetics would fill many library shelves. It would be possible to compile from these works a large anthology "specifically concerned with television aesthetics." In addition, the time is ripe for somebody to write a book or books synthesizing and extending the scattered work on television aesthetics. Of course, no one has yet written such a book. To summarize the situation, television aesthetics does exist and is in fact fairly well developed, contrary to what the casual reader might conclude from a hasty reading of Zettl. On the other hand, the subject is not available in a convenient package. Not only is there no comprehensive book "specifically concerned with television aesthetics"--the subject is also unavailable in most university curricula and has not crystallized as an idea in the minds of many intellectuals.

In a way, Zettl has singlehandedly created "television aesthetics" by giving a name to his own admirable and prolific work. At the same time, Zettl has set humanistic study (in a particular form) apart from the more voluminous work of social scientists, journalists, and even critics, thus perpetuating a split actually established by these three groups of specialists,

who have seldom asked what television fundamentally is and why it is that. It is primarily Zettl's production emphasis that enables him to move beyond criticism into theory, a crucial step that forces more emphatically than ever before the issue of television's position among the arts and humanities.

Zettl proclaims loudly that TV is an art, which is something more formidable than a medium. If TV is an art (which Zettl establishes in Sight, Sound, Motion[2] through his elaborate discussion of elements and techniques), then it does not deserve to occupy a blindspot in the humanities. Yet a blindspot is exactly where TV has been in the arts and humanities as they are defined in intellectual writing, university curricula, library classification systems, foundation funding categories, and popular understanding.

Exclusion of TV (particularly as a focal point for theory) from the respectable divisions and disciplines of knowledge has occurred partially because most of what we see on TV seems so trivial or bad, partially because it is so logistically difficult to study television. Access to both the process and product of television production varies with what the researcher can afford and in addition is subject to restriction by the gatekeepers of the entertainment industries. While mere consumption of TV requires little effort, the systematic study of TV can be accomplished only by overcoming logistical problems that are at best annoyances and at worst staggering.

Studying the artistic and humanistic aspects of TV requires an effort that few universities or outside funding agencies have been willing to support, for television as we know it is the epitome of mass culture/kitsch, which, especially in its extreme form, is criticized but seldom "appreciated" as high culture is. Many universities offer courses in TV criticism, usually with a sociological flavor, but not in TV appreciation. "Appreciation" is an overly polite term, but that is essentially what happens in most film courses,

following "masterpiece" models previously established for art, literature, music, and theatre.[3]

The idea of a TV "masterpiece," by its very improbability, raises some of the most interesting questions about TV: Generally, what is a masterpiece? Specifically, what are the masterpieces? Who says so? Given the existence of masterpieces, who are the masters? How would one go about making a masterpiece? If these questions seem preposterous, it is a result (and cause) of the fact that we do not "appreciate" television, even though Americans collectively spend more time watching TV than they spend on any other activity except sleeping. TV is the main art form in the lives of many Americans, yet because the content is so bad and the TV set so familiar, few people recognize TV as art, even in its fine moments.

But to say that TV is an art is only to say that it can be used by skilled people to imitate or represent the world, to express ideas and feelings, to create pleasing sights and sounds, and to present existing works of art in new ways. How these processes work is, or at least should be, the subject of television aesthetics. "Television aesthetics" is actually an unfortunate term since it couples a specific medium with a branch of philosophy devoted to the study of the general nature of art and beauty. In the literature on film and television, "aesthetics" is commonly used to describe inquiry that focuses on content, technique, and quality (e.g. masterpieces), and which largely ignores the social and cultural context in which art is produced and consumed. Philosophers generally treat questions of context in their writings on aesthetics, but many media scholars use "television" and "film" as modifiers in front of "aesthetics," thus focusing attention on the "distinctive features of the medium," a phrase which occurs over and over in the television literature especially. The "distinctive features" come to be understood as natural rather than humanly

determined--from technical standards (aspect ratio, 525 line scanning, NTSC color, small image size, live transmission) to supposed consequences in content (TV as close-up medium, intimate medium, spontaneous medium). As these prescriptions are challenged from time to time, aesthetics gains a reputation as a naive approach, steeped in unacknowledged ideology.[4]

Fortunately the term "television aesthetics" has caught on only to a limited extent (with Zettl its major proponent). The chief competitor is "television studies," which seems to be the favorite among the many film scholars who have recently become interested in television. A better term would be "television theory." This resembles "film theory," a well established construct (along with communication theory, literary theory, and dramatic theory) that provides an admirable model for the development of the systematic study of television. That is, there should be such a thing (or "discourse") as "television theory" developed from the humanistic investigation of the general nature of television (just as film theory developed primarily from the humanistic study of the general nature of film). "Theory" is a better term than "aesthetics" or "studies" to guide the study of television as a medium distinct from film and other media, having a general nature of its own, and existing within a social and cultural context.

"Television theory" is proposed as a new label for a field of study that has been developing in isolated strands since the 1930s. This development can be divided somewhat arbitrarily into four stages as follows. The bibliography at the end of the essay lists publications chronologically so that the reader can check my stages against a list of representative works.

1. Through the early 1950s. The main theoretical question during this period was whether TV is itself an art or merely a "transmission device" for the other arts. Although a number of writers involved

in television production viewed TV as an art, no one with the stature of Vachel Lindsay or Hugo Münsterberg (two early champions of film) emerged to sing the praises of TV as an art or to explore basic theoretical issues with rigor and thoroughness. Instead much of the writing from this period focused pragmatically on the procedures and consequences of "transmitting" other media (films, adapted theatre, and adapted radio). See especially: Arnheim (1935), Royal (1948), Munro (1949), Hubbell (1950), Rotha (1956).

2. Early 1950s to early 1960s. The Golden Age of TV proved that TV, at least in its dramatic form, can be artistically powerful. Live TV required departures from scripting and staging techniques developed in film, theatre, and radio. Analysis of TV focused on "the unique properties of the medium," mainly liveness and image size. Much of the theoretical work during this period appeared in dissertations. In their subsequent teaching careeres, these authors sensitized generations of students to aesthetic concerns in television and contributed to the diffusion of a new view of TV as a legitimate art form. See especially: Stasheff and Bretz (1951), Rider (1958), Bluem (1959), Hilliard (1959), Currie (1961), Barnouw (1962), Gumpert (1963), Olson (1966).

3. Early 1960s to early 1970s. TV penetration into American homes reached 90% in the 1960s and 99% in the 1970s. The Kennedy and Oswald assassinations, Vietnam War, Yippies, and moonwalk demonstrated the importance of TV as a medium of communication, while as a medium of art TV devolved into a "transmission device" for filmed series. Social scientists began vigorously researching television as concern about ubiquitous TV violence built.

Humanities scholars, led by Marshall McLuhan, became increasingly interested in popular culture, including TV. McLuhan forced attention to the concept of "medium," combining his own eccentric brands of aesthetic theory and communication theory. Zettl's Sight, Sound, Motion introduced "applied media aesthetics," emphasizing television and based largely on production techniques. See especially: McLuhan (1964), Skornia (1965), Hazard (1966), Donner (1967), Gordon (1971), Zettl (1973), Schwartz (1974).

4. Early 1970s to present. Video art has proliferated, along with manifestos grounded in McLuhan and sympathetic to the fashionable idea that "small is beautiful." Low-cost video technology has become a fad in homes and at universities, while already-expensive film technology has become even more expensive (and thus less in demand as a production medium vis-à-vis video). Sophisticated video editing equipment now permits film-style shooting on videotape, making "video" (as in "music video") more like film than like TV in some cases. Film scholars are broadening their studies to include video, e.g. in the case of the University Film Association changing its name to the University Film and Video Association (with a corresponding change in the title of the Association's journal). Structuralism, semiotics, genre studies, auteurism, psychoanalysis, Marxism, feminism, culturalism, organizational theory, political economy, and analysis of ideology have provided theoretical bases for a flood of TV criticism. Lately medium is receiving less attention than is content. McLuhan and Zettl are somewhat in disfavor. Many recent studies focus on the social process through which TV shows are created. See

especially:

Video and video art: Youngblood (1970), Shamberg and Raindance Corporation (1971), Evenson and Shamberg (1972), Weiner (1973), Videofreex (1973), Marsh (1974), Schneider and Korot (1976), Willener, Milliard, and Ganty (1976), Price (1977), Davis and Simmons (1977), Battcock (1978), Graham (1979), Ferguson (1980), Lacy (1982), Patterson and White (1984).

Psychological approach: Pryluck (1973), Baggaley and Duck (1976), Emery and Emery (1976), Baggaley (1980), Fowles (1982).

Critical and metacritical: Shayon (1971), Newcomb (1974), Cater and Adler (1975), Adler and Cater (1976), Smith (1976), Newcomb (1976), Mander (1978), Newcomb (1979), Smith (1980), Goethals (1981), Himmelstein (1981), Adler (1981), Newcomb (1982), Thompson (1983).

Semiotics: Eco (1972), Fiske and Hartley (1978), Tamer (1979), Yearwood (1979), Primeau (1979), Silverstone (1981), Porter (1982), Silverstone (1984).

Cultural studies orientation: Williams (1974), Real (1977), Esslin (1982), Conrad (1982), Marc (1984), Himmelstein (1984).

Political economy, production process: Cantor (1971), Brown (1971), Epstein (1973), Tuchman (1974), Barnouw (1978), Arlen (1979), Gitlin (1979), Stein (1979), Pekurny (1980), Cantor (1980), Tunstall and Walker (1981), Espinosa (1982), Pekurny (1982), Gitlin (1983).

McLuhanistic: Foster (1979), Schwartz (1981).

Zettl et al.: Zettl (1973, 1977, 1978), Toogood (1978), Burns (1982).

Auteurism: Ravage (1978), Wicking and Vahimagi (1979), Newcomb and Alley (1983), Perry (1983).

Film oriented: Bettetini (1973), Metz (1974), Mast (1977), Ellis (1982), Kaplan (1983).

Genre: Hammond (1981), Shore (1984).

This is obviously a crude categorization. Many of the categories overlap. Some works fit comfortably into more than one category. Others do not fit very well in any category.

Conclusion

TV is "the most popular art" and one of our biggest businesses. Yet we do not understand it. It presents nothing but an illusion of life, yet the illusion hypnotizes us for hours on end. TV is a lot like film, a lot like radio, a lot like theatre, a lot like literature. But in the end TV is none of these things. It can be slightly or vastly different, but it is always different. As McLuhan correctly noted, we do most of our thinking about a new medium in terms of old media. We understand video by comparing it to film, radio, theatre, and literature. As television theory develops, we at least are able to make more sophisticated comparisons, analyze our own acts of comparing, and arrive at new understandings of what TV is, how it got to be that way, why it remains that way, and how and why to change it or not change it. As TV takes over our dinner hour, our evenings, our living rooms, and our children, it is essential to seek the deep understanding engendered by the dialogue of theory development.

Notes

[1] Herbert Zettl, "The Rare Case of Television Aesthetics," Journal of the University Film Association, 30, No. 2 (Spring 1978), 3-8, quote on 3.

[2] Herbert Zettl, Sight, Sound, Motion: Applied Media Aesthetics (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing Company, Inc., 1973).

[3] On the "masterpiece" approach in film studies, see Robert C. Allen and Douglas Gomery, Film History: Theory and Practice (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1985), esp. chap. 4.

[4] See especially Jane Feuer, "The Concept of Live Television: Ontology as Ideology," in Regarding Television: Critical Approaches--An Anthology, ed. E. Ann Kaplan (Frederick, MD: University Publications of America, Inc., 1983), pp. 12-22.

Selected Chronological Bibliography of

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Note: Most of the works listed below have citations with complete facts of publication in another bibliography passed out to accompany this paper.

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